

THE NORTH SAANICH WHOLE COMMUNITY AGRICULTURAL STRATEGY

BY ROB BUCHAN, MA, FCIP

SUMMARY Local food security concerns, developing global food production and demand issues and an emerging awareness of the role of food and its production systems in sustainability strategies have set the stage and rationale for new approaches to planning for agriculture. This context contributed to the development of a Whole Community Agricultural Strategy (WCAS) in the District of North Saanich, British Columbia. The WCAS is different from conventional agricultural strategies, in that it is premised on the idea that traditional (i.e., large-scale and industrial) and non-traditional (e.g., small-lot and/or urban) agriculture should be planned for together in order to maximize potential synergies and efficiencies. This paper provides an overview of the rationale for preparing the WCAS and identifies its purpose, goals and some early implementation efforts.

RESUMÉ Les préoccupations en matière de sécurité alimentaire à l'échelle locale, la croissance de la production alimentaire mondiale et des problèmes liés à la demande, ainsi qu'une sensibilisation naissante au rôle de la nourriture et de ses systèmes d'exploitation dans les stratégies pour la durabilité ont posé les jalons et la raison d'être de nouvelles approches de la planification agricole. Ce contexte a contribué à l'élaboration d'une stratégie agricole dans l'ensemble de la communauté du district de North Saanich, en Colombie-Britannique. Contrairement aux stratégies agricoles traditionnelles, cette stratégie part du principe que l'agriculture traditionnelle (c.-à-d. l'agriculture industrielle à grande échelle) et l'agriculture non traditionnelle (p. ex., l'agriculture sur de petits terrains ou en milieu urbain) devraient être envisagées comme un tout afin de maximiser les synergies et gains de rendement potentiels. Cet article offre une vue d'ensemble du principe de l'établissement de cette stratégie et dégage ses visées, ses objectifs et certaines des premières mesures de mise en œuvre.

The District of North Saanich is a relatively small rural residential community of 11,000 residents, situated in the Capital Regional District on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. It is part of a region of approximately 356,000 people with a mix of urban, suburban, rural and agricultural areas. Approximately one-third of the land base of North Saanich is agricultural. Other significant land uses include an international airport, a major ferry terminal, and federal institutional lands.

North Saanich has a long history of agricultural uses beginning with the WSÁNEĆ First Nations harvesting food before European colonization. Pioneers began to grow food in the area in the 1860s, expanding to include a variety of plant and animal farming which was supported by processing and distribution services. However, since the mid-1900s local agriculture has been challenged by the changing economics of farming, and by land development pressures. North Saanich, like many other smaller communities, has a fundamental need to find ways of addressing the challenges to local agriculture. To assist in this effort, the District is served by a municipal Agricultural Advisory Commission and by a regional body called the Peninsula Agricultural Commission.

The challenges for agriculture are not limited to local communities. The Foresight Report on Food and Farming Futures (2011) recently commissioned by Professor Sir

John Beddington, Chief Scientific Advisor for the British government, concludes that the current global food system is unsustainable and needs to be radically redesigned. The report asserts that food and agriculture need to move up the political agenda and be co-ordinated with efforts to tackle the impact of climate change, water and energy supply challenges. Beddington says that we have to “face up to the fact that this is a complicated problem which involves vastly different levels of society and we need to be persuading policy makers not to think about food in isolation, not to think about climate change in isolation, not to think about water in isolation, not to think about energy in isolation. All of them are intimately related.”¹

Food production systems have moved from diverse local and regional systems to increasingly large centralized, national and global systems that require intensive energy inputs to produce food that has

been significantly lessened in both diversity and nutrition. Because food supply chains have become longer, there is increasing interest in changing the food system, such that rural development can facilitate a shorter food supply chain focused on local foodsheds.²

The Province of British Columbia has a very large land base; however, due to geographic constraints only 5% of the land has agricultural production potential, and these constraints also limit the amount of useable land available for human habitation, resulting in pressures to remove land from the agricultural land base. Given that over the next 20 years the provincial population is expected to increase 30% to 5.5 million people, this competing interest further challenges the agricultural land base and the province's ability to produce sufficient amounts of food. This challenge is also present in the global context: It is suggested that we have about 20 years to deliver approximately 40% more food, 30% more fresh water and 50% more energy.³

In recognition of the key role of food and food production systems in sustainable communities, and of the pressing need to address agriculture and food security in different, more effective ways, the District of North Saanich prepared a Whole Community Agricultural Strategy that contemplates complete communities must be seen as foodsheds supported by integrated and diverse local food systems. As such, a complete community is a place to live, work, play and *grow food*. By developing a



Demonstration of edible landscaping project on the front yard of the municipal hall.

strategy that addresses all forms of agriculture, the whole community becomes the focus for action.

The WCAS addresses the agricultural potential throughout North Saanich based on a comprehensive local food systems model. It includes a focus on “non-traditional” (urban) agriculture which is defined as small-scale food production operations on land not traditionally associated with farm business operations. Examples of non-traditional farming include residential yards (back, side and front), public road boulevards, community gardens, community orchards, roof tops, and green spaces in multi-family, institutional (e.g., schools) and commercial developments.

The following schematic⁴ illustrates the factors in a Whole Community Food System and the common area between traditional and non-traditional agriculture:

The preparation of the WCAS involved the following steps:

- > Environmental scan of food system models and non-traditional (urban) agriculture.
- > Participation and advice from the District’s Agricultural Advisory Commission.
- > A Public Workshop and Agricultural Ideas Fair which provided information to participants through presentations on global trends impacting local food systems and local solutions. The event was used to assist in developing ideas and initiatives, facilitating dialogue and prioritizing actions in each of the strategy areas i.e., within each key factor of the Food System.
- > A validation process where stakeholders and community members could comment on and validate the strategy elements.

The results of the Agricultural Ideas Fair and Planning Workshop included 89 recommended actions for the Strategy. Of these 89 actions, 47 applied to both traditional and non-traditional agriculture and 51 applied to more than one factor in the local food system.

The high incidence of actions that apply to more than one of the food system factors illustrates the widespread recognition of the interconnected nature of the food system. It also points to the benefit of

**Local governments—and the
planning profession generally—
are well positioned to become
significant partners in the
development of new food hubs.**

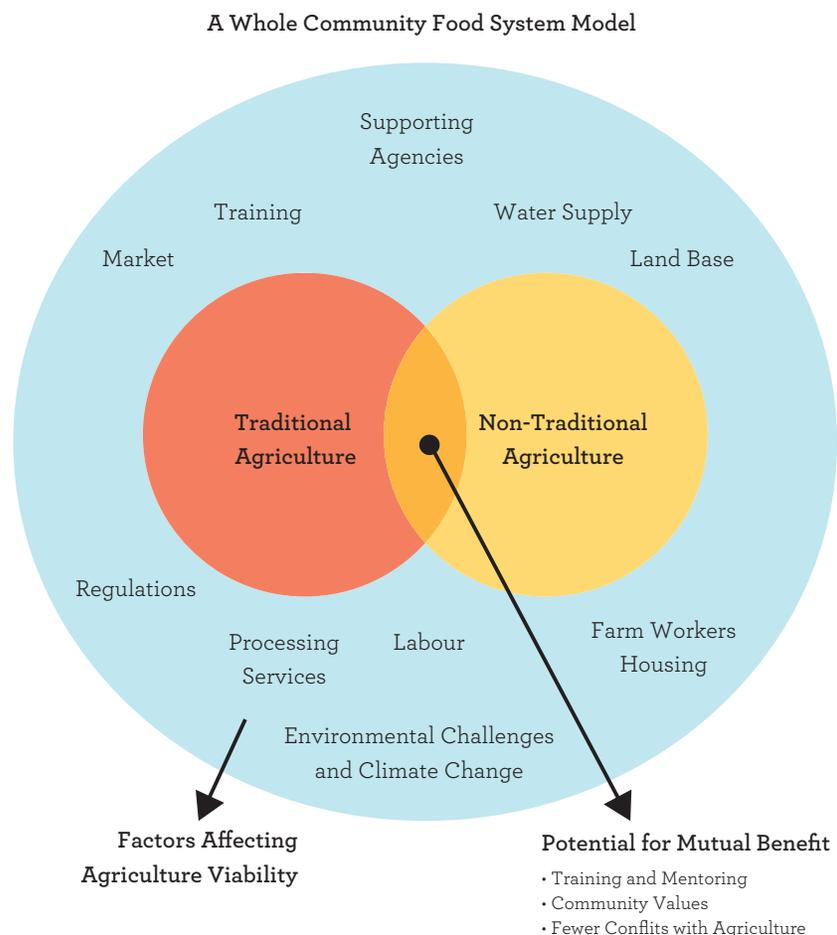
undertaking a WCAS based on the food system model approach. The WCAS enables the identification of actions that have multiple benefits for traditional and non-traditional agriculture as well as all factors in the food system.

The WCAS identified three very significant beneficial synergies from this whole-community approach. Firstly, there is the potential shift in values that should come from viewing the entire community as a farm and as part of the food system. People undertaking non-traditional

agriculture will appreciate the effort and challenges required to successfully grow food. This will lead to a greater appreciation of farming and on the value of food itself. Secondly, the increased involvement of people in non-traditional agriculture may encourage others to participate as well. Thirdly, there may be a broader benefit of implementing actions in each of the food system factors. Individually these actions would be a benefit to the specific factor, collectively they should result in a better, more efficient and effective local food system.

The North Saanich Whole Community Agricultural Strategy is considered to be part of a continuum of community efforts to support the local food system and is an important platform from which to move the community forward into further action towards and dialogue on the goal of local food self-reliance.

The WCAS presents a broad suite of Municipal and Community actions to support and enhance traditional and non-traditional agriculture. The process and public dialogue



highlighted the interrelationships between the recommended actions and multiple factors in the food system and to both traditional and non-traditional agriculture. Finding effective, locally-supported solutions that improve local food systems for the whole community requires innovative, even radical, approaches and an understanding of the interconnectedness of factors affecting sustainability and the food system.

The Strategy includes an implementation guide that identifies further forums and dialogues to achieve local food self-reliance. One of the points repeatedly made during the Public Workshop and Agricultural Ideas Fair was that the workshop and resulting strategy should be considered as only one step in the effort to achieve food self-reliance. Therefore, the Strategy recommends having further community dialogues to review, adjust and validate the priority actions.

Over time it will be important to monitor and evaluate the progress in implementing this Strategy and subsequent versions. Some of the indicators of success may include an increase in the amount of land in production, an increase in farm income and an increase in the amount of food grown locally along with a decrease in the percentage of food imported to meet our needs. Even though the WCAS was only formally adopted in March of 2011, several implementation initiatives are already underway. These include:

- > Amending the zoning bylaw to be more

permissive for farm worker housing and farmer markets;

- > Reviewing and amending the sign bylaw to allow for more effective farm signage;
- > Initiating community action through the District's Agricultural Advisory Commission;
- > Developing a municipal work plan to implement the priority actions;
- > Developing a project on the municipal hall property to demonstrate edible landscaping; several gardens have been planted with produce being donated to the local food bank.
- > Supporting a Farmer-to-Farmer forum within which farmers can engage in dialogue on issues and solutions to local challenges (e.g., marketing, pollination, etc.); and
- > Initiating a project with the Peninsula Agricultural Commission to undertake an economic development strategy for agriculture. Municipal Funding has been committed and further grant funds are being sourced.

There will likely be challenges faced by the District of North Saanich in implementing the WCAS. It was apparent during the preparation of the WCAS that some, but certainly not all, traditional (large-scale commercial) farmers did not initially appreciate the potential value of non-traditional farming. The process, however, was successful in addressing their concerns and securing support in the farming community.

This process suggests that non-traditional agriculture can play an important and effective role in local food security. Pursuing only traditional agriculture in agricultural plans and strategies may be akin to navigating our way forward by looking in the rear view mirror. To address the looming global food crisis and to strengthen local food security, new approaches are needed. While the WCAS was ultimately strongly supported by farmers and the community and adopted by North Saanich Council, the early implementation efforts will need to be successful for both traditional and non-traditional farmers to maintain this support. ■

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